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The Agency of Liminality: Army Wives in the DR Congo and the Tactical Reversal of Militarization

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Abstract

The inherently unstable boundaries between military and civilian worlds have emerged as a main object of study within the field of critical military studies. This article sheds light on the (re)production of these boundaries by attending to a group that rarely features in the debates on the military/civilian divide: army wives in a ‘non-Northern’ context, more specifically the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Drawing upon the ‘analytical toolbox’ of governmentality, we explore how civilian and military positionalities are called upon, articulated and subverted in the governing and self-governing of Congolese army wives. We show the decisive importance of these wives’ civilian-military ‘in-betweenness’ both in efforts to govern them and in their exercise of agency, in particular the ways in which they ‘tactically reverse’ militarization. The article also demonstrates the dispersed nature of the governing arrangements surrounding army wives, highlighting the vital role of ‘the civilian’ as well as the ‘agency of those being militarized’ within processes of militarization. By demonstrating the relevance of studying Congolese army wives and militarization with an analytical toolbox often reserved for so called ‘advanced militaries/societies’, and by revealing numerous similarities between the Congolese and ‘Northern’ contexts, the article also sets out to counter the Euro/US-centrism and ‘theoretical discrimination’ that mark present-day (critical) military studies.

Keywords: military/civilian boundaries; militarization; liminality; army wives/spouses; Congo (DRC); governmentality; gender; post-colonial studies

Introduction

The construction and reproduction of boundaries between military and civilian statuses and worlds is the object of growing attention in a range of disciplines. This includes the field of critical military studies, which is marked by a ‘prioritization (of) the “in-between” – the neither exclusively military nor singularly civilian’ (Basham, Belkin and Gifkins 2015, 1). One group that rarely features in these debates – as within military studies in general – is army spouses. Given this group’s complex in-between position between civilian and military spheres, this relative neglect is rather surprising. Since army wives’ ambiguous position can be conceptualized as ‘not at the margins of the military institution, but rather at the centre of anything called the military/civilian divide’ (Hyde 2015, 51), studying this group can offer a useful route into exploring the constantly shifting boundaries between the inside and outside of military institutions and worlds.

This article attends to army wives in the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Drawing upon the Foucauldian ‘analytical toolbox’ of governmentality (Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2006, 100), it sets out to explore how the liminal positionality of army wives is called upon, articulated and resisted in their governing and self-governing, as reflected in their subjectification. By highlighting the dispersed and dual civilian/military nature of the governing arrangements (re)producing the militarization of army wives, the article draws attention to the context-specific and open-ended nature of processes of militarization. Moreover, it elucidates the importance of the agency of ‘those being militarized’, in particular how they may ‘tactically reverse’ their militarization. As such, it contributes to the emerging debates within critical military studies on army wives, militarization and the (re)production of civilian/military boundaries (e.g. Gray 2015, 2016; Hyde 2015; Wool 2015).

By querying into the (self)governing of army wives within one particular context in ‘the Global South’, we also seek to counter the Euro/US-centrism of (critical) military studies, (sub)fields that engage only in a limited manner - and highly selectively - with military institutions in ‘other parts of the world’. Moreover, ‘more traditional’ military studies tend to heavily draw upon colonial and racial lexicons, portraying ‘non-Northern’ armies as a ‘totally different species’ (read: primitive, unprofessional, and dysfunctional), which allows for the construction of an image of ‘Northern’ armies as ‘professional’ and ‘(post-)modern’ (Barkawi 2012; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2008). While such colonial imagery is largely absent in critical military studies, which has provided much insight into the politics of race in military settings (e.g. Basham 2013; Henry 2012), the field engages only sparingly with military institutions outside the ‘Global North’, being heavily focused on armed forces in so called ‘advanced liberal democracies’. Moreover, both more conventional and more critical military scholars tend to study ‘Other armies’ and processes of militarization in ‘Other contexts’ with different theoretical lenses and analytical tools. This is problematic since it amounts to a form of ‘theoretical discrimination’, which

in turn contributes to the reproduction of a colonially scripted distinction between ‘civilized/developed’ vs. ‘uncivilized/underdeveloped’ spaces, as if certain conceptual notions and analytical frameworks are ‘too sophisticated’ for (supposedly) ‘underdeveloped’ contexts. By employing an analytical toolbox (i.e. governmentality) that is rarely used in research on the military sphere (and other phenomena; see Walter 2012) in the ‘Global South’ and by outlining similarities between the Congolese and other contexts, we hope to counter the ‘Othering’ that is explicitly or implicitly present in much of the literature on armies and militarization in so-called ‘developing’ countries.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we position ourselves within the literature on army wives, civilian/military liminality and militarization. Next, we briefly sketch the context in which Congolese army wives are situated and discuss the methods and methodology employed for this study. In the subsequent section, we explore the ways in which the military and civilians in the DRC are engaged in the governing of army wives, which is followed by an analysis of how these wives are produced/produce themselves through and beyond the civilian and military efforts at governing them. We end with a number of reflections on the nature of militarization and our own failures in attaining our postcolonial ambition to counter ‘Northern’ centrism.

Army wives, civilian/military boundaries, and militarization

Reflecting the familiar gendered lexicon of militarization and war, which is often manifested in obscuring the contribution of women (e.g. DeGroot 2000; Enloe 1989, 2000), research on army wives occupies a marginal space in both more ‘traditional’ and more critical military studies. Moreover, the thematic engagement within research on army wives has been highly selective. Not surprisingly, mainstream military studies have queried mostly into the impact of arrangements with military spouses and families on operational effectiveness (e.g. Bowling and Sheriman 2008; Bourg and Segal 1999; Segal 1986). Critiquing (yet inevitably and unwillingly also somehow contributing to) this instrumental focus, another strand in the literature examines the various forms of military-related or induced labor enacted by military wives (e.g. Enloe 2000; Harrell 2001), highlighting their crucial, but often little visible contributions to military functioning. For instance, Wool and Messinger (2012) analyse the ways in which army wives’ care-giving of family members often places them in a grey zone where distinctions between ‘labors of love’ and ‘institutionally compensated work’ are intrinsically blurred. This reflects a growing focus within the field of military studies on the construction and blurring of civilian/military and public/private boundaries, and how these processes relate to the dynamic interplay between army wives’ positionalities, subject positions and agency (Hyde 2015; Wool 2015). Examples of such work are Gray’s (2015, 2016) analyses of army wives’ narratives of domestic abuse, which foreground the fluid and complex

enactments of public/private distinctions in the British army, and Hyde's (2015) exploration of the everyday practices through which the military institution affects subjectivities.

Drawing on this literature, we explore how complex, liminal civilian/military positionalities and subjectivities are played out in the governing and self-governing of Congolese army wives, conceptualizing 'governing' as the structuring of 'the possible field of action of others' (and self) (Foucault 1982, 790). To that end, we analyse how army wives are 'called upon' (Hall 1996) in processes of governing and how they, as subjects, are produced/produce themselves through (and outside) such processes, (re)creating the conditions of their liminality. Hence, we attend to the relationally constituted field of power in which military wives are situated and the forms of 'governmentality' this field (re)produces, mapping the ensemble of 'institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics' which, in continual interplay, are at work in their governing and self-governing (Foucault 2004, 111). In particular, we focus on how this (self-)governing is affected by 'militarization', here conceptualized as a form of governmentality that (re)produces the power of military rationalities, discourses, knowledges, and practices. This prompts us to study processes of 'subjectification' or army wives' (ongoing) constitution as subject both in terms of self-identification/self-knowledge and as being subject to power (Foucault 1982). Yet the effects of the interplay between subjectification and technologies and techniques of government¹ are never predetermined; they are mediated via contingent processes of translation, interpretation and negotiation, which are shaped by the agency of those involved. However, studying 'the agency of being governed' (Hansson and Hellberg 2015) is particularly challenging, since it is 'impossible to carve out cleanly a particular governing technology and draw a causal and direct relation to a technology of the self' (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2015, 113). As such, we recognize the impossibility of tracing the agency of army wives as distinct from the governing technologies that produce them. Moreover, our understanding of agency locates it not simply in resistance, but also in compliance (see Hansson and Hellberg 2011 for further discussion). Consequently, the agency of army wives is here understood as not only limited to instances where they resist rules or assigned subject positions, but applying also when they enact or appropriate them.

By conceptualizing militarization as a form of governmentality, we draw attention to how it is driven by dispersed arrangements of government which affect technologies of the self in complex and ambiguous manners, implying it is an open-ended process that is co-constituted by 'the agency of those being militarized'. This stands in contrast to interpretations of militarization that presuppose a relatively straightforward

¹ Following Walters (2012), we approach technologies as the overarching rationales or logics at play in processes of governing, while techniques of government are conceptualized as the practices that operationalize governing technologies.

connection between sets of beliefs and practices emanating from ‘the military institution’ and/or the ‘military-industrial complex’ on the one hand, and (militarized) ‘technologies of the self’ on the other (cf. Enloe 2000), as if the ‘micro-physics’ of the ‘disciplinary power’ of the military institution were transposed onto the ‘macro-physics’ of governing populations (cf. Allen 2003, 75). Implicitly or explicitly, such interpretations of militarization sometimes assume that the process is primarily driven by the governing efforts of the armed forces and that these are somehow (almost) always effective. This renders militarization inherently instrumental to the power and functioning of military institutions (e.g. Lutz 2001), often resembling functionalist reasoning. By contrast, when seen as emerging from the complex and contingent interplay between a range of disparate elements, militarization does not only/primarily emanate from the armed forces. In the context of this paper, both military wives and (other) civilians are agents of militarization, the former by taking on military subjectivities and the latter by constructing and engaging, in various ways, with army wives ‘as military’. Furthermore, the military’s efforts to govern cannot be assumed to be inherently successful in propelling militarization and increasing its power. In fact, militarization can undermine the military’s power, such as when militarized discourses and knowledges reinforce the position of non-state armed actors or civilians vis-à-vis the military. In the present paper, the power of the armed forces as institution is, for instance, threatened when army wives publicly denounce and contest the military (for example when highlighting their crucial contributions to military functioning), even while they do so based on their status ‘as military’, in turn reflecting their militarization.

Hence, conceptualizing militarization as a relational effect produced by a heterogeneous field of power renders the study of what may be termed ‘the civilian world’ (taken as the non-military) crucial for understanding the process, including the militarization of army wives (cf. Wool 2015). Arguably, recognizing the socially constructed nature of the boundaries between ‘military’ and ‘civilian(s)’, which partly overlap with a public/private distinction that collapses in a governmentality perspective, implies recognizing that ‘the military’ is always constructed through and out of the non-military, or ‘the civilian’ (cf. Mitchell 1991). Another implication of conceptualizing militarization as a form of governmentality is that this approach, through its emphasis on the contingent outcomes of pluriform and dispersed governing arrangements, complicates efforts to generalize the mechanisms, contents, and effects of militarization across contexts. As argued by a range of scholars, some work on militarism/militarization— particularly when applied to attendant concepts such as ‘masculinities’— problematically assumes that militarized norms, ideals and subjectivities take everywhere the same form (cf. Higate 2003; Kirby and Henry 2012). However, processes of militarization are constructed within specific time-space contexts, reflecting and co-constituting particular histories, imageries, and geographies (Woodward 2004, 4), which are also gendered in specific ways. As concluded by Bernazolli and Flint (2009, 395), ‘the social construction of place and the social processes of militarization are entwined’.

Situating Congolese army wives

As a place-specific process, the militarization of Congolese army wives must be understood in relation to the historically shaped meanings, rationalities and everyday practices associated with and enacted by the armed forces in the DRC. Consequently, militarization hinges upon and (re)produces representations of ‘the military’ and ‘soldiers’ developed over the *longue durée*, which translate into particular social categorizations and stereotyped imagery. In contrast to contexts where the military is primarily associated with war-fighting and warriorism, in the DRC, these images strongly relate to illicit and coercive forms of revenue generation and power abuse to obtain personal gains. As detailed elsewhere (Verweijen 2015), such stereotypical imagery is reproduced, but also subverted, through everyday interactions between the military and civilians. The latter tend to distinguish between ‘the military in general’, conceptualized at a high level of abstraction and mostly imbued with negative connotations, and the specific military units and soldiers deployed in their everyday environment, to whom they often attribute more positive characteristics. This is important to note since the (self) governing of army wives heavily draws upon imputing to these women the same values, rationalities and practices that are associated with the military/soldiers. At the same time, everyday interactions and experiences may subvert these representations, therefore complicating processes of militarization.

Aside from through sedimented representations of the military held by civilians, processes of militarization, and how they affect the (self)governing of army wives, are shaped by the forms, functioning, and discourses of the military organization itself, the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique du Congo (FARDC). The FARDC was created after a negotiated settlement adopted in 2003, which paved the way for the merging of the fighting forces of the different belligerents of the Second Congo War (1998–2003) into a new national army. The army today consists of 125,000–145,000 personnel, around half of whom are deployed to the Kivu provinces in the east, which are a hotbed of armed group activity.

Similar to armed forces elsewhere (e.g. Gray 2015), the Congolese defense establishment recognizes army wives as part of the military community. Spouses and children are allowed to live in barracks, and the families of officers are formally entitled to certain benefits, as stipulated in the Law on the Statute of FARDC Personnel. This Law recognizes family allocations (art.126), military families’ rights to free health care (art.134) and allocations for transport costs when officers are redeployed (art. 147). However, reflecting the troubled workings of the Congolese state apparatus in general (Trefon 2009), none of these stipulations is currently implemented. Like their husbands, who receive derisory wages and are faced with abominable service conditions, army spouses have to ‘fend for themselves’, bearing

the costs of healthcare, accommodation, and travel largely themselves. Thus, military families, in particular of lower ranking personnel, often belong to the poorest strata of Congolese society (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2008).

A similar discrepancy between official policy and the situation on the ground exists in relation to the presence of army wives in operational zones, where soldiers engage in combat operations. Officially, army wives are not allowed to follow their husbands into such zones, since it violates the policy of *mouvement sans famille*. However, in practice, numerous military families can be found near the frontlines, where they live either in makeshift camps or in rented civilian houses together with their husbands/fathers. One reason for this is that both army wives and their husbands fear what they commonly name ‘forced divorce’—that is, not seeing each other for many years, due to the limited possibilities to travel and obtain leave. In the light of the constant state of war and military operations, commanders are reluctant to grant soldiers extended periods of leave. Therefore, and given the dilapidated state of the road and rail systems as well as the high costs of travelling by air, it is for many soldiers simply impossible to visit their family within the allocated time, especially when the latter lives hundreds of kilometres away (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2016).

Another reason why transgressions of the policy of *mouvement sans famille* are frequent is that the policy is not actively enforced, although this highly differs per military region and commander. This half-hearted enforcement reflects the deeply ambiguous position of the military hierarchy vis-à-vis military wives. On the one hand, reflecting modes of reasoning that originated in the colonial era (Flament 1952), commanders are tolerant as they believe that soldiers behave better and are more obedient when their wives are around. Furthermore, by providing a range of crucial logistical and support tasks (see further below), such as transporting soldiers’ belongings on rotations, army wives compensate for the shortage of available resources in the military. On the other hand, the presence of army wives is often described as hampering operational effectiveness by providing distraction, including during attacks on army camps, when soldiers’ first impulse is to bring their families to safety. These perceived disadvantages reinforce commitment, at least in official military discourse, to enforce official policy and keep army wives out. However, such formal discourse should also be seen in the light of the institutional stakes in not openly admitting violations of the rules, leading to denials that military families are present in/close to operational zones (interviews with FARDC officers, 2006–2016). Hence, there are substantial discrepancies between official and unofficial discourses and practices vis-à-vis army wives, reflecting the often uncomfortable ambivalence of military establishments towards military families and the private sphere that can also be found in other contexts (e.g. Gray 2015; 2016).

As most infantry brigades and regiments deployed to the east change location approximately every 1–2 years, the lives of army wives following their husbands are

marked by recurrent relocations. Such unmooring generally entails the weakening of ties with prior social networks, including the family in the region of origins/upbringing. At the same time, because of frequent displacement and the stigmas associated with being an army wife (as explained in the following), developing new relations within the civilian environment tends to be difficult. Consequently, army wives often stay strongly attached to the military unit of their husband and the associated spouses, which form their primary social network. The nomadic existence and status of outsider also circumscribe the economic activities that army wives can engage in. Given that their husbands' salary—between US \$100–175 a month, depending on rank—does not suffice to make ends meet, most military spouses engage in revenue-generation activities that are common to the Congolese 'survival economy', often using a part of their spouses' wages as initial investment. These activities include day laboring (e.g. doing laundry or cleaning houses); charcoal production; hair dressing; sex work; selling self-made foodstuffs and drinks; and small-scale, large-scale and transborder trade in a vast range of items, such as cigarettes, vegetables, second-hand clothing, or cannabis (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2016). The additional income gained in this manner is crucial for the social reproduction of the household, even though many military families still do not manage to send all their children to school or stay in good health due to a poor diet and limited access to healthcare.

In sum, the Congolese military and army wives are caught in an ambivalent relationship where each needs the other for their own reproduction. This mutual dependency is underpinned by a highly gendered division of labour that draws on, and helps construct, public/private and civilian/military divides that render army wives' contributions invisible and unacknowledged. As further highlighted below, this feeds into sentiments among army wives that they 'do not exist' for the military, even though they perform crucial tasks in the face of adverse conditions.

Notes on collecting the narratives

This article is mainly based on interviews conducted in October 2014 among military spouses and other civilians in various towns and villages in the territory of Uvira, in South Kivu province. Together with our local research partner CIRESKI,² we interviewed in total 75 army wives, both individually and in groups, in Lingala or Swahili, without interpreters. Yet the article also heavily draws on material and insights obtained through years of previous ethnographic research among personnel of the Congolese armed forces and the civilians with whom they interact conducted for a

² CIRESKI (Centre Indépendant de Recherches et d'Études Stratégiques au Kivu) is an NGO specialized in conducting research based in Uvira.

variety of other research projects.³

While no conscious decision was made to focus only on female spouses, no (civilian) male spouses were encountered in the research sites. This is likely related to the fact that this group is very small due to the low proportion of female army personnel (around 3.2 % in 2016), their tendency to marry other military, and the non existence of official same-sex partnerships. The majority of the interviews were conducted with women in longer term partnerships with rank-and-file soldiers and lower ranking officers, most of whom continually follow their partners to their various deployment sites. The poor living conditions of this group contrast with those of the wives of superior officers, who are often relatively well to do and more rarely follow their husbands to operational zones.

In addition to army wives, we also interviewed a range of other civilian groups (here used as a generic term for non-service or non-armed group members), such as small-scale economic operators and local authorities, focusing on their understandings and experiences of army wives. We conducted these interviews in order to examine the expectations and ideals emerging from (other) civilians vis-à-vis army wives, since these form an integral part of technologies of governing. Moreover, these interviews helped unearth a range of often illicit practices enacted by army wives that they do not readily speak about themselves, but which are crucial for understanding their agency.

Certainly, this research set-up is problematic since it somehow reproduces the very civilian/military divide, as well as the ambiguous position of army wives vis-à-vis that divide, which this article problematizes. Yet, drawing from previous experience, we believed that talking to army wives and ‘other civilians’ simultaneously would have had an inhibiting effect, producing mainly poised and accommodated narratives that reflect efforts to display an air of politeness – triggered also by our presence as (white, Northern) researchers. Moreover, while the chosen set-up perhaps provoked the articulation of stereotyped representations of both the FARDC and their wives, reflecting the tendency to present self-images of victimhood in relation to us as outside researchers, this set-up did not – as we will demonstrate – preclude more nuanced representations of army wives. Such nuancing enables both the liminal position of army wives and their exercise of agency.

Military efforts to govern army wives

The (self)governing of army wives and the ways this promotes and draws upon their militarization are in part shaped by the military organization as a whole; individual

³ Judith Verweijen has conducted ethnographic research among FARDC units and civilian populations in the Kivu provinces since 2010. Maria Eriksson Baaz, together with Maria Stern, held interviews with FARDC personnel between 2004 and 2013 for various research projects, addressing gender discourses, sexual violence, and defense reform interventions.

army personnel, notably their husbands; and associations of army wives, which are commonly established per military unit (regiment, brigade) or at camps and bases. This section describes the governing efforts of these various military and military-linked actors. We first account for the construction of the desired object of government by querying into the constitution of the heavily (but ambiguously) gendered ideal army wife. Subsequently, we look at the techniques of governing employed to mould army wives into these idealized shapes, probing into the ways in which they are called upon (both as civilians and military).

The ideal army wife

In many ways, notions of the ideal army wife reflect ideals of family relations, femininity, and masculinity that find currency within Congolese society as a whole. While highly diverse and fluid (depending on socio-economic position and time-space context), such ideals centre on the familiar biblical images of the husband as the just, wise provider and the head of the family, and the wife as a virtuous, orderly, committed spouse and mother, who respects and cares for her husband (Hollander 2014). As in many other settings, the plethora of churches active in the country, and other institutions such as schools and the core family, are important sources of these idealized notions. Through the activities of army chaplains, this idealized imagery of family and gender relations also finds its way into the army directly.

While reflecting general images of gender and family, in the military setting these notions gain particular purchase and twist by the frequent invocation of military ranks and hierarchies. This is especially clear in articulations of ideal relations between army wives and husbands, with for instance the husband being symbolized as a general/colonel/commander and the wife as a lower ranking soldier or subordinate, or in the case of female military personnel married to other soldiers, a *gardecorps* (bodyguard). The salience of military metaphors and practices in depicting marital relations is also mirrored in assertions by army wives and female army personnel that they are better wives (compared to civilians) in that they, having been socialized into the military hierarchy, know how to properly show respect for their husbands (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013). This illustrates how, aside from by general representations of ideal wives in the DRC, idealized notions of army wives are also shaped by and attached to particular military ideals, which are ‘transferred’ to spouses. These ideals are mostly connected to (familiar) military notions of control, discipline and obedience, and of knowing to be humble/subservient (*mikitisa*) – which are contrasted with discursive constructions of ‘civilians’ (and ‘bad’ women/wives) as embodying disorder, and living a life devoid of respect, morality and obedience (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2008).

Two aspects of such military ideals/expectations are particularly prominent. The first is that military wives are expected not only to obey military orders, but also to respect the military hierarchy, including outside the home. As we will demonstrate further

below, a good army wife needs to know and show proper respect for the ranks of military personnel and treat their wives accordingly, reflecting the ways in which army wives fulfill central functions of ‘role preservation’ in the military (Harrell 2001). The second aspect is that a good army wife, like military personnel themselves, is expected to stay out of ‘troublesome’ behaviour – notably, breaking with the military code. As in other contexts (cf. Segal 1986; Harrell 2001), such behaviour is generally construed as casting a shadow not only on the character of the individual husband/serviceman, but also on his unit as a whole. As one army wife put it:

We have to know how to behave with humility and respect. Because we are wives of the military. The way we behave is important. If people see that you are disrespectful, gossipy (*songi-songi*) and getting in trouble all the time, they will think ‘ah, this commander is a bad one, he has no discipline’.⁴

Together with the general tendency to see one service member as representing the military as a whole, these dynamics allow for the transformation of ‘unruly/troublesome’ behavior of army wives from a ‘personal/private/civilian’ to a ‘public/military’ concern (cf. Gray 2016; Harrison and Laliberté 1994). Similarly, army wives’ good behaviour – interpreted as a sign of a harmonious home life that is the product of the husband’s management – is seen to provide evidence for commanders’ leadership skills. As concluded by a chief warrant officer ‘if he [the commander] can’t take care of his family, he can’t take care of his unit’.⁵ This reflects the porosity of and complex interactions between the public/private, family/unit, civilian/military divides also found in many other military contexts globally (cf. Harrell 2001; Gray 2015, 2016).

The civilian and military ideals described above translate into specific expectations attached to army wives related to the enactment of certain tasks and duties. Like elsewhere, Congolese army wives perform a variety of (formal and informal), highly gendered duties for their husbands, which are crucial for military functioning. These include what Wool and Messinger (2012) call ‘labours of love’; the complex and intense caregiving to spouses who have been injured in the line of duty, often involving injuries that require long-term rehabilitation or lead to handicaps. Additionally, Congolese army wives perform what Harrell (2001, 59) terms ‘morale, public relations (PR) and ceremonial’ duties. For instance, on 8 March, International Women’s Day (an official holiday in the DRC), military spouses take part in the annual women’s parade, where women from various organizations and spheres of social life march in distinct sections, wearing the specific *pagne* (cloth) that distinguishes their group. In the context of this parade, military spouses are clearly

⁴ Interview, Sange, October 2014.

⁵ Interview, Beni, April, 2014.

seen as ‘representing’ the military, both by the institution and by civilians. This testifies to their ‘ceremonial’ and PR roles, and how they are seen as an extension of the military. Another illustration of this is that they often complement the football team of female soldiers that traditionally plays against female police as part of the 8 March festivities.

Other tasks performed by Congolese army wives relate to what may be called logistical functions that are crucial to the military’s reproduction, or, in the words of Enloe (2000, 40): ‘tasks that any large military force needs but wants to keep ideologically peripheral to its combat function and often tries to avoid paying for directly’. In the Congolese context, this includes cooking, fetching water and firewood, washing husbands’ uniforms, and constructing huts in new locations. While, expectedly, these contributions are mainly framed as ‘any household duties’ and therefore downplayed by the hierarchy and military personnel (cf. Enloe 2000), they crucially compensate for the FARDC’s deficient infrastructure, logistics, and social service provision to its personnel.

Military techniques of government

The idealized imagery and expectations presented above are at the core of military techniques of governing army wives. These techniques consist of a range of practices, including direct disciplinary interventions and socializing efforts. The harshest disciplining takes place where military spouses publicly defy the military organization, such as when staging public protests against delays in the disbursement of their husbands’ salary, or other bad service conditions. Such manifestations, which take place in a context where any form of unionization by army personnel is strictly forbidden, are doubly embarrassing for the military. Not only do they show ‘disorderly conduct’ and overt protest against military policies, they also expose the sub-standard service conditions of military personnel. Such bad publicity explains why manifestations often invite direct repression. For example when in December 2013, the wives of soldiers of the 1011th regiment barricaded the bridge leading up to Uvira town, to protest months of salary arrears, they were immediately dispersed by Military Police in a heavy-handed manner (Radio Okapi 2013).

Direct disciplinary interventions are also enacted by ‘Bureau 5’, the department of the general staff of military units that is charged with social affairs, including family issues and civil-military relations. Where military spouses are in conflict with each other or with civilians, or display ‘improper behaviour’, the S5 (staff officer of Bureau 5) intervenes to settle the affair. In many cases, husbands are held accountable for the behaviour of their spouses, which creates incentives for them to ‘teach their wives proper conduct’. Interventions by Bureau 5 are particularly frequent when it concerns conflicts with civilians, which are mostly unwanted by the military hierarchy as they are feared to taint the image of the unit as a whole. This, again, may have detrimental side effects on military operations, by prompting civilians to

withhold crucial information or refuse the contributions in cash or in kind that the military commonly collects in the name of facilitating combat action (Verweijen 2015).

In addition to Bureau 5, another important institution for ensuring proper conduct is associations of army wives, which are generally led by the wives of senior commanders. How active these associations are and how they function (regularity of meetings; tasks performed, etc.) is highly variable, depending on unit command and women's own initiatives. Common tasks performed by these groups, which are roughly similar to the Family Support/Readiness Groups in the US Army (see Harrell 2001), are disseminating important information about the unit, giving assistance in times of crises (e.g. fund-raising and organization in relation to illness and funerals), providing marital advice, and resolving conflicts between army wives and (other) civilians.

Aside from providing assistance, associations of army wives are also vehicles of socialization, organizing meetings where the wives of senior commanders instruct others how to behave properly as military spouses, thereby ensuring their 'correct behavior and fulfillment of expectations' (Harrell 2001, 62). The messages diffused in those gatherings – and the ways in which army wives are called upon as both civilians and military – reveal how the liminal position of army wives is crucial to efforts to govern them. On the one hand, these communications interpellate army wives' military identities. As a president of an association of military wives explained:

We give them instructions (*tolì*), how we as wives of soldiers should live with wives of civilians. How we as wives of the military are supposed to live with people. To also show respect amongst ourselves. To know who is the wife of whom [soldier]. To know that her husband has a higher rank than mine. To teach them how to obey/show respect (*kotosa*) [...] Some wives are like 'I am the wife of an *adjutant* (warrant officer), but I am better, I dress better than you who are a wife of a major'. No, that kind of behavior we forbid! You need to obey her/show respect, because she is a wife of a senior rank. That is what we teach them.⁶

This citation reflects the central role of the notions of respect, obedience and being humble, in particular by showing respect for the hierarchy and chain of command, while also expressing the idea of wives as having 'preserving roles' and as 'wearing' their husbands' rank. Hence, military wives are situated here as part of the military institution, and as crucial for reproducing military imagery and discourse. Yet, on the other hand, the teachings diffused by associations of army wives call upon these women's civilian positionalities. As the same president explained, another message constantly repeated in gatherings of army wives is that they are civilians:

⁶ Interview, Luvungi, October 2014.

We wives of soldiers are not soldiers. We are civilians (*raia*). We cannot take the power (*kimokonzi*) of our husbands and make it our own. They are the soldiers. We wives are civilians. And we need to know how to live with our civilian sisters and brothers (*bandeko na biso baraia*). To go to the water pump and make demands saying ‘don’t you know I am the wife of a soldier!?’ No, that is not the way to do it. Soldiers are [our] men and you as a wife/mother (*bamaman*), you are a civilian.⁷

Such teachings, aiming to keep army wives from engaging in ‘troublesome behaviour’, clearly interpellate the civilian identities of army wives. Army wives are here reminded that they are like any other civilian with no special privileges, having no right to exert power in the name of the military. These exhortations should be seen in the light of the specific position and reputation of the Congolese armed forces, which, as described above, are often associated with a ‘misuse of military power’ – or the claiming of privileges like free transport and food contributions from civilians based on their status as ‘military’ (Verweijen 2015).

Hence, and paradoxically, army wives are simultaneously reminded of their civilian status –having to refrain from usurping military power – and called upon to embody military ideals. Furthermore, whereas in the first example military wives are constructed *as part of* the military organization, in the second they are situated *outside* the military, as civilians. This shows how military wives are placed in an ambiguous position in which they are both/neither military and/or civilians and in which they – in their position as civilians – should still embody the military traits of restraint and control, in contrast to other civilians who are associated with unruly behaviour. Such ambiguity reveals how liminality – being ‘in between’ civilian and military worlds – forms an integral part of efforts to govern military wives. As we will discuss in the next section, liminality also occupies a crucial position in the ways army wives are governed in ‘civilian’ contexts.

Civilian interpellations: constructing army wives in ‘civilian contexts’

How then do civilians imagine and call upon army wives’ subjectivities? From the interviews, it emerged that while civilians tend to recognize military wives’ civilian status, they often frame them simply as military, based on their alleged self-attributions. As one focus group participant commented: ‘They consider themselves to be soldiers’ (*banajikamata sawa vile biko basoda*).⁸ Yet, while for the military and their wives, the meanings attached to ‘the military’ (especially when juxtaposed to ‘civilians’) predominantly echo official narratives on the nature and role of the armed forces (e.g. ‘protecting citizens/civilians and their goods’ and ‘defending territorial

⁷ Interview, Luvungi, October 2014.

⁸ Focus group discussion, Sange, October 2014.

integrity'), in civilian discourse, the Congolese military bears connotations of asociality, thugishness, and violence. Thus, soldiers are portrayed as *batu ya pamba* (losers), *mendiants* (beggars), *miyibi* or *bamwizi* (thieves), and as misbehaving savages (*sauvage*) with violent/aggressive tendencies (*mkali*) (see also Verweijen 2015; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2008).

This stereotyped imagery is also reflected in civilians' narratives on FARDC wives, in particular of the rank and file. The latter are represented as being 'militarized' in the sense of inhabiting the same traits and displaying the same behaviour historically associated with the Congolese armed forces. Thus, they are depicted as difficult, hotheaded, and aggressive, and as having contempt for civilians. As expressed by one civilian: 'They brag about themselves (*kujipiga ku kifuwa*), saying "we are wives of the military, you can do us nothing"'.⁹ Furthermore, many civilians described how, similar to their husbands, army wives use their military status to impose themselves on civilians: 'Wives of the military often have a big mouth (*banakuwa na domo*) at the mill and at the water tap. They like to quarrel with civilian women, they are very arrogant (*kiburi*).'¹⁰ Others narrated how they engage in illicit activities like stealing: 'They go into several fields where they often destroy the crops, and steal manioc and sweet potatoes [...] this leads to conflicts'.¹¹

Portrayals of army wives as inhabiting the same characteristics as their husbands (e.g. aggression and a penchant for coercion/imposition) reflect a masculinization of army wives in civilian discourse. Yet army wives are simultaneously depicted *as* women in a manner that echoes representations of women in/associated with armed forces more generally, including those serving in the FARDC (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013). Such representations are marked by classic forms of sexualization and 'whore narratives' (e.g. Enloe 2000; Sjöberg and Gentry 2007) as evidenced by descriptions of army wives as *femmes légères* (facile women), or *bamayala* or *ndumba* (whores in Swahili and Lingala). This promiscuous behaviour is seen as stemming both from their alleged (masculinized and depraved) lust/sexuality and from poverty (forcing them to engage in survival sex). Consequently, liaising with army wives is portrayed as dangerous. Similar ideas are expressed in various popular expressions and songs, like 'Toi et Moi' by the famous singer Fally Ipupa, in which he sings that 'wives of soldiers are not for civilians to try to master/dominate' (*mwasi ya soda aza muntu te po civil amataka*).

While many of the civilians interviewed articulated the stereotyped, negative representations described above, therefore constructing army wives as part of the armed forces, this was only one dimension of their discourses. In fact, civilian framings of army wives proved highly ambiguous, being contingent on time-space context but also varying within one conversation, depending on the discursive setting

⁹ Focus group discussion, Sange, October 2014.

¹⁰ Focus group discussion, Runingu, October 2014.

¹¹ Focus group discussion, Runingu, October 2014.

(cf. Verweijen 2015). Thus, many civilians emphasized that one cannot talk about army wives as one group and refused to make generalizing statements, highlighting these women's heterogeneity. In the words of one woman:

Among them [army wives] there are good ones and bad ones. There are army wives that we have a mutual understanding with (*tunaelewana*). There are other wives of civilians who are aggressive and are arrogant, and we dislike each other (*munachukiana*). It are not only wives of soldiers who are bad (*wabaya*).¹²

Such more nuanced opinions often alluded to the liminal status of army wives, emphasizing they were not part of the military, but civilians like them. Yet, as reflected in the citation above, while problematizing the distinctions between military and civilian (wives), such representations were often still haunted by FARDC wives' association with the military. Indeed, by saying it is not only wives of soldiers who are bad, it is somehow still implied that they are bad. In this way, the representations of army wives as 'also civilians' continued to be tainted by their supposedly military status and the imagery ascribed to that position. Such imagery and associations are, as we will see below, crucial for making sense of the ways in which army wives sometimes fervently emphasize their civilian status. This evokes the question how army wives themselves invest and disinvest into the subject positions allotted to them, thereby (re)producing and (re)assembling the self.

Tactically reversing militarization

Army wives' subjectivities not only reflect the ambiguous civilian/military status assigned to them in the governing configurations in which they are situated – from both discursive and social practices – they also 'tactically reverse' (Foucault 1997, 185) the subject positions allocated to them, drawing on the very ambiguity surrounding their status.¹³ Clearly, this is not such a linear or consciously engineered process as the language of tactics presupposes, reflecting the difficulties of separating 'the agency of those being governed' from technologies of government.

Many army wives talked about themselves as being civilians, arguing that there is no difference between them and other civilians. This positioning as civilians partly reflects the workings of military efforts to govern army wives, often echoing the teachings they receive from the military and associations of army wives. As one army wife put it: 'We are not military. We are wives of the FARDC. That is different (*eza ndenge moko te*). We are civilians'.¹⁴ Yet self-portrayals as civilians also reflect the workings of civilian interpellations. During the interviews, army wives would

¹² Focus group discussion, Uvira, October 2014.

¹³ We are indebted to Kasper Hoffmann for drawing our attention to tactical reversal in Foucault's work.

¹⁴ Interview, Luberizi, October 2014.

articulate their civilian status particularly strongly when we talked about how civilians represent them, rendering such emphasis a seeming response to the negative attributes attached to army wives by civilians. For instance, after concluding that civilians hold many stereotypes about army wives, one interviewee continued:

We are women, like all other women. Our men are also just men, with the needs of other men [laughing]. We are all the children of God. We have the same worries and struggles to feed our families and our children. Really we are the same (*tozali ndenge moko*).¹⁵

However, while military wives often highlighted their status as civilians, they also talked about themselves as military and as fundamentally different from (other) civilian women – in ways that both contained and surpassed the military identities (also) assigned to them. Many of the accounts in which army wives situated themselves as ‘somehow military’ were grounded in stories of the particularities of being an army wife, such as always living in fear of death and fatal injuries, leading a nomadic life, always being a visitor and outsider etc. – resonating with the experiences of army wives living in military camps overseas (Segal 1986; Hyde 2015). As one army wife put it:

We have a different life [compared to the civilians here]. We are like visitors (*bapaya*). They have their families and all the relations here and they never travel. We go here and there. And our families are far away. If I need advice or support ... it is difficult, because my family is so far away.¹⁶

Army wives sometimes also articulated a more military identity by reiterating the need for respect for the military hierarchy and to lead a life marked by discipline and control, echoing the military position allotted to them by the military institution. For instance, some emphasized the particular challenges of living in civilian neighbourhoods, arguing that it is not good that civilians are let into the secrets of the life of the military.

In other cases, however, military identities were invoked in ways that clearly surpassed those acknowledged and assigned by the military institution. One important manner in which this occurred was by highlighting that army wives perform important functions for the army, thereby forming part of it. This contribution was often situated in the context of critique of the government for failing to properly provide for military personnel and their families. In the words of one army wife:

¹⁵ Interview, Sange, October 2014.

¹⁶ Interview, Luberizi, October 2014.

We are part of the army. Because we provide what the government fails to provide. The government does nothing! (*eloko te*). So we do it. We do lots of work. And we keep their morale high and give our husbands comfort and courage. Really we are also serving this nation (*tozoservir ekolo*). But we are not recognized. The new government says we do not exist!¹⁷

As reflected in this citation, army wives' claims to a military status and corresponding entitlements clearly draw upon the range of gendered and largely unacknowledged duties performed 'for' the army, as described earlier. Moreover, these claims feed into occasional resistance against the military organization, such as demonstrations to denounce the poor service conditions, showing how they shape and are shaped by 'transgressive' military subjectivities, whereby army wives fail to inhabit/resist inhabiting the positions allotted to them by military teachings.

Similar claims, grounded in a self-attributed military status, also translate into certain expectations vis-à-vis civilians. As the wife of a captain stated: 'Today, civilians should respect us, as we also fight in all manners against the enemy (*adui*), together with the soldiers'.¹⁸ Such expectations also sometimes feed into 'unwanted' behaviour in interactions with civilians such as demanding special privileges and exemptions. These include asking for better conditions at civilian hospitals (e.g. a bed in a better ward or being treated first) or during transport (refusing a seat on the deck of a ship where one is exposed to the sun), or jumping the line for tapping water. A military status is also invoked in army wives' income-generating activities, providing similar exceptions and protection as to FARDC personnel. For example, when asking if she paid the *taxe d'étalage* (display tax) at the market, one army spouse commented: 'We do not need to pay, for we are the wives of the military'.¹⁹ However, there is no formal rule that exempts army wives from paying these taxes, revealing how this is self-attributed privilege. Additionally, army wives make use of their association with the military for engaging in illegal economic activities like selling prohibited alcohol; unauthorized logging for charcoal production; running 'black markets' (selling merchandise from their houses, which is officially forbidden); or traffic in outlawed goods such as cannabis. Wary to get into trouble with the military, and often demanding a fee in return, civilian authorities and security services generally refrain from trying to stop or punish such activities (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2016).

When claiming privileges or exemptions from legislation and rules, army wives perform a military identity that sits uncomfortably with the military values they are expected to incarnate by the military organization. At the same time, when carrying out tasks that subvert the civilian order, they often act in concert with their husbands, for instance selling the meat of the livestock that the latter have stolen. Since

¹⁷ Interview, Luberizi, October 2014.

¹⁸ Interview, Bukavu, May 2015.

¹⁹ Interview, Lemera, October 2015.

husbands expect their wives to assist them, including by facilitating illicit activities, performing such tasks is also a way in which they (as expected) act as extension of and support to their husbands. Yet this does not imply that they act merely out of imposition. Many of the army wives engaged in illegal activities stated they simply prefer these types of revenue generation as they yield more money, or entail less hard labour than the alternatives.

While sometimes acting out a more ‘military’ role in everyday interactions with civilians, in other contexts or moments, army wives were observed to profile themselves more explicitly as civilians. Such ‘civilian performances’ appear particularly frequent when army wives, who often live in rented houses among civilians, are in need of assistance with household chores, child care, and money. Following the mutual solidarity generally displayed by those living in the same (civilian) neighbourhood, such urgencies often prompt them to address their neighbours, leading them to being invoked and perceived as any other neighbour in need of help. As one army wife, painting a contrast to the inhospitable attitude displayed by military neighbours in overcrowded army camps, explained: ‘If my child becomes ill [...]. I go and borrow money from the neighbours, they help me [...] It is better to live among civilians. Because your neighbour will at least respect you (*banakuheshimia*) [...]’.²⁰

Even when engaging in illegal activities enabled by their ‘military’ status, army wives may still engage in more ‘civilian’ performances. For example, an army widow involved in the cannabis trade told one of us that when travelling to Fizi in order to buy the stuff, she tended to use the same drivers: ‘When you know the driver, you go all the time with the same car. When I have 5000FC they will understand and many know my case (*banajua cas yangu*)’.²¹ As she explained, this implied they knew that she was a widow with many dependent children and had little money, therefore allowing her to pay lower tariffs for transport. Hence, to enable her cannabis trading activities, this woman drew at once upon her (indirect) association with the army, to prevent being busted by the security services, and her social role and status as widow and single mother (being construed as more ‘civilian’ within this particular setting).

The above examples provide some insights into how the agency of army spouses draws upon the liminal space in between civilian and military worlds, through the selective appropriation and deployment of allotted statuses and identities in discursive and social practices, allowing these women to ‘tactically reverse’ the militarization they are subjected to. These oscillations between subject positions and social role performances are not a unique feature of army wives. Rather, they reflect the ‘tactic’ agency of social agents in unstable social terrains more generally, where flexibly enacting and deploying forms of identification and discursive repertoires is key to

²⁰ Interview, Bukavu, May 2015.

²¹ Interview, Uvira, October 2014.

charting paths of action, or what Vigh (2006) calls ‘social navigation’. Yet the inherent liminality of ‘army wives’, as (re)produced by the ambiguous framings and corresponding ways to govern them as both/neither civilians and/nor military, arguably enlarges the space for tactical reversals and redeployments, rendering the always incomplete project of militarization even more tenuous.

Concluding reflections

This article has attended to the governing arrangements surrounding army wives in the DRC. We have shown the crucial import of army wives’ liminality – their status in between civilian and military worlds – both in arrangements to govern them and in their own agency within these arrangements. Army wives are called upon as both civilians and military in highly ambiguous manners. For instance, they are expected by the military organization to inhabit military ideals of control and restraint by interpellations to their both/either/alternating civilian and military identities, being in some contexts constructed *as part of* the military organization, but in others situated *outside of* it, as civilians.

While recognizing the inherently difficult task of analysing the governing of the self, the article has provided hints into the ways in which Congolese army wives invest and disinvest into the subject positions allotted to them. In particular, it has shown how their subjectivities both reflect and subvert the ambiguous civilian/military statuses they are ascribed – by tactically reversing and (re)deploying them – thereby drawing on the spaces between civilian and military significations and their layered connotations. In this manner, Congolese army wives both are agents of and resist militarization.

These findings raise questions about the nature of militarization that go beyond the context of the DRC. Analysing militarization through the lens of governmentality not only focuses attention on the dispersed nature of the governing arrangements propelling this process, it also highlights its contingent nature, including the non-necessary and non-linear connection to the functioning of the military institution. Furthermore, it demonstrates the crucial role of the ‘civilian’ dimension within processes of militarization (cf. Wool 2015): it is through civilian (often stereotypical) discourses on ‘the military’, through civilian institutions, frameworks and standards that ‘the military’ is created and recreated (cf. Mitchell 1991), which is again a precondition for reinforcing and extending the power of the discourses, rationalities, and practices framed as ‘military’. Additionally, by highlighting that the imprint of military elements on subjectification is by no means a straightforward or necessary process, free from tactical re-appropriations and reversions, a governmentality approach points to the importance of agency within processes of militarization, in particular the agency of ‘those being militarized’.

By demonstrating the relevance of studying Congolese army wives with an analytical toolbox often reserved for so called ‘advanced militaries’, and by revealing numerous similarities between the Congolese and ‘Northern’ contexts, we have tried to realize our postcolonial ambition, articulated at the outset of this article, to counter at once the Euro/US-centrism that marks present-day (critical) military studies, and the colonial framing of African armed forces common to a range of disciplines. Yet we have certainly also failed in this postcolonial endeavour. Above all, we have written *about* Congolese army wives in a way that reflects *our* academic interests. We have picked only parts of their stories, parts that intrigue us and, supposedly, the readers of this article (other critical military scholars). Walking down familiar and highly problematic paths (reflecting also the common disinterest in materiality in such scholarship) we have simply glossed over what the army wives told us that they wanted us to write about – their dire living conditions – turning that instead into marginal ‘necessary contextual information’. As such, we have certainly ‘failed to listen’ and are reproducing the very privilege that we as post-colonial scholars claim to oppose.

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